

# A Focus on the Discussion Method with Democracy in Education

Shanshan Fan<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3WA, United Kingdom

Correspondence: Shanshan Fan, Cardiff University, Cardiff, CF10 3WA, United Kingdom.

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## Abstract

This study explores the role of conversation in fostering democratic education, highlighting the limitations of traditional indoctrination methods and advocating for active student engagement. It positions the discussion method as a means to advance democracy in education, underscoring the significance of listening, speaking, and student-centered pedagogy. Drawing on John Dewey's educational philosophy, it probes the symbiotic relationship between democracy and the discussion method, emphasizing its capacity to enhance cognitive flexibility, social aptitude, and knowledge construction. Practical classroom applications of this method, along with strategies to address implementation challenges, are also examined. In conclusion, the study underscores the need for continued research and refinement of the discussion method.

**Keywords:** discussion method, democratic education, student participation, classroom interaction

## 1. Introduction

In the development of education, the traditional indoctrination method no longer meets student participation needs in the classroom. It is not conducive to realising democracy in education (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 11). In order to achieve democracy in education, the popular discussion method of teaching has been a hot research topic in academia (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). One of the most critical features of the discussion method is the focus on listening and speaking, and the student-centred model of education assumes that students learn to listen to other's ideas and to express their own opinions during classroom interactions, which helps them develop verbal communication and social skills (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). In a democratic education, students can express their

strong ideas while teachers and students must pay attention to each speaker's expression (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 24). Teachers and students are partners and need to share responsibility in the classroom. When both respect each other, it increases the emotional rewards and promotes a good teacher-student relationship, which reflects the democratic nature of education (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 25).

The discussion method of teaching is a democratic method of education that facilitates intellectual agility, improves students' social skills, helps them communicate and cooperate better, and promotes new constructions of knowledge (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 23). The famous educationalist Dewey (2018) proposed the pragmatism theory, where both

pragmatic theory and discussion method are designed to promote human development, which has important implications for achieving democratic educational teaching (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 22). This assignment will detail the importance of the discussion method based on Dewey's theory of pragmatism. The assignment will critically argue for the discussion method's advantages, disadvantages and practical application. It will validate the argument that the discussion method is a democratic method of education.

## **2. The Relationship Between Democracy and Discussion Method of Teaching**

The concept of democracy, Dewey (2018) has a deep understanding of this, arguing that democracy is not just presented in the form of government, more importantly, it is a form related to life, an experience gained through the typical exchange (Dewey, 2007, p. 68). In terms of the nature of education, Dewey (2007) argues that both democratic education and democracy are collective and that in order for members of the group to all acquire shared values, there need to be equal opportunities between group members through social interaction, for learners to acquire knowledge from others (Dewey, 2007, p. 66). Dewey (2018) is a strong advocate of child-centred education, arguing that the traditional teacher-centred philosophy of education is not conducive to the development of democratic education, arguing that rote learning and didactic forms not only mechanise students' learning but are also detrimental to their developing creativity (Hopkins, 2018, p. 434). Dewey (2018) emphasises that democratic education involves learning interactions that continually develop the individual's ability to learn, as well as the ability to recognise and appreciate the learning of others (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 25). Dewey (2018) argues that the teacher's role is that of a collaborator and guide, that the teacher's position must not override the children's position in learning, that the teacher is required to be child-oriented, to stand in the children's position to organise activities, and that the teacher's role should change from that of authority to that of a facilitator (Hopkins, 2018, p. 434), all of which reflect Dewey's pragmatic ideas and have an essential influence on the development of discussion in the classroom method (Hopkins, 2018, p. 434).

Brookfield and Preskil (2005) find that the use of

discussion method in education is tied to the concept of democracy. That discussion, which has respect for the participation of others at its core, encompasses forms of human life interaction and democratic social models that have undeniable political significance (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 11). Both democracy and discussion value the relationship between speaking and listening, between giving and receiving (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 25). This all reflects the positive implications of discussion method as a democratic method to education for the development of teachers and students and implies that discussion method has a bright future in the path of democratic education (Hopkins, 2018, p. 434).

## **3. Discussion Method of Teaching**

Gall and Gillett (1980) define the discussion method of teaching as the creation of interaction between teacher and student or student and student in the classroom, with open-ended discussions in small groups through listening and verbal and non-verbal means, to promote the joint development of teacher and student (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). Groups are collections of people with some degree of mutual influence (O'Donnell, 2015, p. 416) and contribute to collective intelligence in impossible ways for independent learners (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). The discussion method is problem-oriented, where the teacher uses the problem orientation to get students to agree on an issue through discussion, which often focuses on perceptions of public issues, and which aims to help students learn to analyse and evaluate and modify their evaluations in their learning ways at the end of the discussion to promote critical thinking and analytical skills (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). What is most meaningful in discussion teaching is that not only do students gain knowledge from the teacher, but the teacher also generates new ideas for teaching and learning as a result of the discussion and exchange, which can be instructive in how teachers can organise their teaching to suit the learning needs of their students better (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). This helps teachers to recognise that each student is a unique individual and that different students will think in different ways in order to ask, explain and solve problems (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). Wolfe (2004) argues that in small group discussions, the teacher has a guiding role, moving around the classroom, asking students

questions, listening to their learning and assessing whether they understand the content (Wolfe, 2004, p. 80).

Fisher (1968) found that using discussion in teaching can change students' attitudes towards learning in a positive direction (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 100). Interaction between teachers and students keeps the teaching atmosphere alive, and the excitement and pleasure experienced from it bring much enjoyment to learning (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 25). Brookfield & Preskill (2015) argue that in the discussion of teaching, to some extent, the educated person is allowed to speak as much as possible, which facilitates the motivation of the students' will to learn, and that students can be motivated to acquire more knowledge by sharing or drawing on knowledge in cooperation with the teacher or students (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 100). Discussing and communicating are more conducive to solving learning problems than individuals working alone (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 100). At the same time, discussion method can lead to generative learning, forcing students to clarify their understanding of issues through ongoing reflection (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 100). Democratic discussion works best when students are willing to participate in the teaching of the discussion, and their contributions add a deeper level of understanding to the discussion. When learners express their views, other participants absorb the different perspectives and even face the challenge of disagreement, which can be a valuable learning experience for all participants (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005).

The non-verbal information discussion participants use in their communication adds emotional meaning to the classroom (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 99). The discussion method is more likely to engage students who prefer to learn through auditory means (Fleming, 2001, cited in Wolfe 2004, p. 80). The discussion method has a catalytic effect on students who are poor independent learners (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 101). In order to ensure a democratic method of teaching and learning, students need to focus on four skills in discussion: to be able to speak freely, to listen to others, to learn to analyse critically and to be aware of evaluation. At the same time, teachers need to provide students with opportunities for discussion, create a democratic environment for discussion, and model and purposefully organise classroom

discussions (Gall & Gillett, 1980, pp. 100-101) to promote continuous student development. This exemplifies how discussion method in practice is vital in achieving democratic education.

#### **4. Application of the Discussion Method of Teaching in Practice**

Prior to implementing the discussion method in education, educators must establish clear learning objectives and instructional strategies. This involves conveying to students a thorough comprehension of the expected duration of the discussion and outlining steps to optimize learning outcomes (Wolfe, 2004, p. 80).

Throughout the discussion process, creating an environment of active listening and respectful dialogue is crucial. Interruptions during discussions can disrupt the free flow of ideas and hinder the cognitive growth of group members. Therefore, nurturing a culture of attentive and considerate listening is essential. In cases where some participants remain silent, it becomes necessary for them to actively contribute their thoughts. Encouraging participation not only fosters interaction among group members but also facilitates heuristic learning, ensuring the overall effectiveness of the discussion (Wolfe, 2004, p. 80).

Discussion serves as a bridge connecting informed individuals with their peers through the exchange of ideas and perspectives. This exchange often leads to transformative shifts in beliefs as individuals are persuaded by the viewpoints of others, sparking processes of self-reflection and self-criticism. The method of democratic discussion is characterized by a foundational commitment to respectful listening and an inclusive embrace of self-critique (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). The classroom environment offers a platform for individuals to experience the principles of democratic education. In this context, the lecture-discussion model is commonly utilized, involving a concise 10 to 15-minute lecture by the instructor. This lecture sets the stage for subsequent discussions, clarifying core course topics and ensuring the discussion remains focused (Wolfe, 2004, p. 81).

Another technique is the fish-bowl arrangement, where tables and chairs are organized in concentric circles. The class is divided into two distinct groups: the "discussants," consisting of 6-15 students, and the "observers," comprising the remaining students. This setup enhances concentration and active participation among

the discussants while enabling observers to assume a spectator's perspective. This unique vantage point allows them to gain insights from the discussion and critically assess the issues under consideration (Wolfe, 2004, p. 81). Incorporating the structured controversy approach involves dividing the class into two groups. One group focuses on the positive aspects of the issue, while the other examines the negative facets. This technique encourages critical thinking by requiring students to explore both sides of a topic, promoting a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter (Wolfe, 2004, p. 81).

In summary, effectively applying the discussion method in the classroom necessitates consideration of learning objectives, active listening, and techniques such as the lecture-discussion, fish-bowl, and structured controversy. These strategies contribute to the development of democratic education by enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, and a deeper understanding of complex issues.

However, there are challenges for teachers to conduct discussions effectively; some teachers curb everything they want to say to facilitate students to be able to speak entirely in their participation, giving them all the time they need, which results in some students being particularly vocal and others are silent (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 242). The discussion method requires appropriate guidance from the teacher to model a democratic attitude to discussion. Teachers can set up model discussion groups and establish basic guidelines for the discussion to ensure that every student can participate equally. Teachers can also assign roles to group members, such as group leader and note taker, ensuring that each member's role is rotated and that the rights of each student are respected (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 206). In addition, some students may be unfamiliar with the discussion process, which may lead to a low level of participation. In such cases, teachers should help them develop a discussion form designed to help learners clarify the objectives of the discussion and record essential points made during the discussion. (Wolfe, 2004, p. 80). In order to achieve a democratic method of discussion, teachers need to be sensitive to students' emotions and reduce their fear of participating in discussions, the teacher can ask the participants a simple question before the

discussion and allow them a few minutes to write down their ideas and then share them with their best friends before sharing them with the class so that students gradually become willing to participate actively in the discussion and better promote the development of communication skills and social skills (Wolfe, 2004, p. 81).

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the discussion method of teaching and learning has emerged as a powerful tool for advancing the cause of democratic education. As noted by Gage and Ber-liner (1975), the incorporation of discussion into the educational process facilitates a dynamic exchange that encourages students to refine their ideas through active listening, critical analysis of diverse perspectives, and ongoing debate on the subject matter. This robust interaction substantially contributes to students' cognitive development, fostering their problem-solving abilities and critical thinking skills (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 100). Moreover, the democratization of education achieved through the discussion method extends its influence beyond the classroom. It has a profound impact on students' motivation to learn, fosters positive attitudes towards education, and enhances memory retention, as highlighted by the insights of McKeachie (2002, cited in Wolfe 2004, p. 80). Nonetheless, while the discussion method holds great promise, its effective implementation often encounters challenges due to the insufficient discussion skills of both educators and students. This underscores the need for continuous research and professional development initiatives to enhance the method's efficacy within educational settings. Educators must equip themselves with the essential skills and knowledge to establish an environment conducive to productive discussions, in line with the principles of democratic education (Gall & Gillett, 1980, p. 102).

As educational paradigms continue to evolve, the discussion method remains a leading strategy for advancing the objectives of democratic education. Its capacity to elevate the quality of education, stimulate critical thinking, and enrich students' learning experiences underscores the necessity for ongoing research and development efforts in this field. By addressing the challenges and limitations inherent in the implementation of the discussion method, the educational community can unlock

its full potential, leading to a more democratic, engaging, and enriching educational landscape for students.

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In an era where active participation, critical thinking, and effective communication skills are paramount, the discussion method emerges as a potent tool for instilling democratic values within educational institutions. With the appropriate support, training, and dedication, educators can harness the transformative potential of this method, fostering a more inclusive and participatory educational environment that benefits both students and teachers. The discussion method stands as an indispensable asset in the pursuit of democratic education. It not only motivates students to develop into well-rounded individuals with strong problem-solving abilities but also ignites their overall enthusiasm for learning. While challenges may arise during its implementation, ongoing research and professional development offer opportunities to overcome these obstacles and further advance the cause of democratized education. As discussions continue to shape the future of education, the potential to foster democratic values and enrich the learning experience remains a compelling incentive for educators and researchers alike.

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